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Mother-infant separations in prison. A systematic attachment-focused policy review

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Mother-infant separations in prison. A systematic attachment-focused policy review.

Mothers in prison separated from their young children are an overlooked group. Attachment theory could provide a useful model to underpin interventions and better support women affected by separation from their infants. Current policy draws on a limited body of evidence and research has developed considerably since its first design. This review systematically searched all relevant UK prison policy and government documents with regards to mother and child separation in prison and analysed the extent to which these documents draw on attachment theory. Following initial searches, 58 documents were thematically analysed. Attachment was implicitly referred to in most documents but only explicitly mentioned in four. Global themes identified included 'separation as trauma'. However, document groups varied in focusing either on the mother or the child and there were no joint perspectives. Developing and researching specific attachment-informed interventions might be one way forward as would further attachment-based research in this area.

Keywords: women offenders; prison; child; human attachment

Introduction

In the UK imprisoned mothers are separated from 18 000 children each year (Prison Reform Trust, 2014). Figures are not clear with regard to the ages of the children but one third of women in prison have a child under five years (Prison Reform Trust, 2014) i.e. approximately 1 500 women. The most recent figures on births in custody suggest that approximately 120 women give birth per year (Ministry of Justice, 2008), and there are around 750 women per year imprisoned with a child under 18 months (Gregoire, Dolan, Birmingham, Mullee, & Coulson, 2010). By combining figures from a 2013 Freedom of Information request on applications and acceptances to Mother Baby Units (described below) and research on women who are eligible to apply (Gregoire et al.,

2010), it can be estimated that around 500 women a year are separated from their children under 18 months, but the true figure may be higher.

In England and Wales Mother and Baby Units (MBUs) exist in prison so that some women can remain with their children under 18 months. These are separate to the main prison, with individual rooms and some flexibility from the prison regime. Mothers and expectant mothers apply to a specific unit and can be refused a place if it is not seen to be ‘in the best interests of the child’, which is generally due to child protection concerns or substance misuse (see 11 Million, 2008). As with any children separated from their mothers by imprisonment, the options are to be placed in kinship care or into state care (Prison Advice & Care Trust, 2011). Some of these children will be placed for adoption and never reunited with their families (Choice for Change, 2015). There are no official records of children of female prisoners, or numbers of children in care and those who are permanently separated from their mothers (Galloway, Haynes & Cuthbert, 2014). There are currently only six MBUs with a maximum capacity of 67 places¹ which is far lower than the 500 women separated per year (see above), thus women affected by separation form by far the largest group of mothers of children under two years in prison.

As is well documented, the pre-natal period is a crucial time for child development (e.g. Deave, Heron, Evans, & Edmond, 2008; Huizink et al., 2003; Mulder et al., 2002), as are the early years (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2010; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Talge, Neal, & Glover, 2007; Wadhwa, Sandman, & Garite, 2001). A growing literature highlights that separation is also exceptionally difficult for women and can affect their mental health and wellbeing in prison (Byrne, Goshin, & Joestl,

¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/life-in-prison/pregnancy-and-childcare-in-prison>

2010). Research into mothers in MBUs and mothers separated from their infants has highlighted that women in prison and with young children are at particularly high risk of mental health difficulties (Birmingham, Coulson, Mullee, Kamal, & Gregoire, 2006), and those separated are at even greater risk, particularly following recent childbirth (Gregoire et al., 2010; Woolredge & Masters, 1993). This research has also found that depression and exacerbation of existing mental health difficulties could be directly related to separation.

Reuniting with children is understandably a primary concern for women on release (Hutchinson, Moore, Propper, & Mariaskin, 2008). Lack of support with mental health difficulties whilst in prison may have an inevitable impact on the children when reunited with their mothers (Birmingham et al., 2006). Furthermore more recent research has shown that those mothers not reunited with their children were more likely to have re-offended and to have more ongoing mental health difficulties and substance misuse than those mothers who were reunited on release (Dolan, Birmingham, Mullee, & Gregoire, 2013).

Historically research on separation has focused on the impact on the child (e.g. Rutter et al., 2007), however more recent attachment research provides a theory for understanding the impact on the parent as well (e.g. Borelli, Goshin, Joestl, Clark, & Byrne, 2010; Cassidy, Poehlmann, & Shaver, 2010).

At the core of attachment theory is Bowlby's thesis that the biological bond is formed by children seeking proximity to caregivers ensures both physical and psychological survival and adaptive functioning (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment research initially focused on categorising children's attachment in terms of secure, anxious and avoidant (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978), this has now extended to adult attachment style classifications (see Shaver, Belsky, & Brennan, 2000). Attachment is

considered to be fundamental to the development of an individual's affect regulation (Schore, 2010), as well as the basis of interpersonal trust. Thus parent-child interactions develop into internal working models of relationships (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986), which then determine adult support and can be transmitted to the next generation through several mechanisms including parenting capacity and parental reflective functioning (Fonagy, 1999). The importance of adult attachment style in relation to adult psychological health, coping and interpersonal stress is well-documented (Bifulco & Thomas, 2013). This paper will not cover the debates around attachment theory² but examine its use in policy and government documents in acknowledgement of its wide role in academic research, clinical settings and general parenting literature. Current National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)³ guidelines require all services working with children and families at risk to use attachment models and assessment tools where possible (NICE, 2015).

Attachment theory is relevant to a prison setting as it could provide insight into supporting women when distressed (and concomitant mental health and substance misuse difficulties), and for rehabilitation and reducing re-offending, particularly when separations are permanent. Attachment theory offers a psychological model to understand the impact of separation on mothers and how they might cope in the prison environment (Borelli et al., 2010), including their levels of self-harm, substance misuse and mental health. In the current drive towards evidence-based policy (a relevant example might be Early Years policy⁴, Department for Education [DfE], 2014),

² See for example Burman, 2008.

³ NICE is a UK public body of the Department of Health which provides national guidance for health and social care standards. See <https://www.nice.org.uk/> for further information.

⁴ Early Years policy is a statutory UK framework which sets the agenda for care and education of children birth to five. Whilst not without its critics (e.g. www.earlychildhoodaction.com),

analysing policy documents from an attachment perspective could shed some light on the rationale behind practice in prisons. There is no UK-based evidence base for outcomes for mother and child separations in prison, however, there is a body of relevant work from attachment researchers in other countries (see for example, Byrne et al., 2010; Kenny, 2012).

Current policies specifically addressing mothers in prison and their babies have been developed since the 1999 review of MBUs and the later Corston report⁵ in 2007 which brought women's prison issues to the fore. These documents along with follow-up reports, policies and HM Inspectorate of Prison (HMIP)⁶ work form a corpus which refers to mother and baby separations and are the most relevant publically available documents.

In terms of the most recent policy, the National Offender Management Service 'Achieving better outcomes for women offenders' (2015) document identifies seven key areas to improve support for women. These include family contact, pro-social identity, mental health and substance misuse, which could all be improved by supporting women with separation from their children. Thus this review aims to explore and understand how separation is referred to across relevant policy and government documents as a way of reflecting on the best means of supporting women separated from their babies and the staff who work with them.

it is an attempt to use current knowledge of child development to underpin government policy.

⁵ The UK Home Office commissioned Baroness Corston to conduct a report into vulnerable women in the prison system. The report called for a 'radically different...woman-centred, integrated approach' and its recommendations have informed government policy.

⁶ HMIP is an independent inspectorate which reports on prisons, youth offender institutions etc, in particular their conditions and the treatment of prisoners. This work forms part of the UK's obligations to the UN Convention against Torture. See: <http://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/about-hmi-prisons/>

Aims

- 1) To systematically search all relevant UK prison policy and government documents with regards to mother and child separation in prison.
- 2) To understand the extent to which these documents draw on attachment theory.

Design

This review applies the principles of a Rapid Evidence Assessment⁷ (a research tool used by UK government departments) to policy. This is a more limited form of systematic review using a more focussed research question in a shorter time period. The overall structure of Kitson, Marshall, Bassett, & Zeitz's (2013) review was followed because it drew out the diverse perspectives between different types of documents which seemed appropriate for this review. This review is comprehensive in its scope and the steps are clearly outlined below.

Search method

All policies since the 1999 MBU review, including HMIP reports were systematically searched. Government websites were primarily used for prison policy, however a few could only be found referenced in other documents or third sector websites. Inspection reports and non-policy government documents were searched from 2007, i.e. from the date of the Corston Report⁸. All relevant third sector sites were searched and any missing references from citations were also tracked down.

⁷ See:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140305122816/http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/networks/gsr/resources-and-guidance/rapid-evidence-assessment>

⁸ In 2006 the UK Home Secretary asked Baroness Jean Corston to carry out a review of women in the criminal justice system following the deaths of six women at HMP Styal. Her report

All documents were compiled, searched for duplicates and sorted into three categories. First a summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of the documents was carried out to answer the questions ‘Is separation referred to?’. The documents were then thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with a particular focus on the issue of separation to understand ‘How is separation referred to?’.

Inclusion criteria

All policy documents since 1999 and all other government/inspection documents from 2007 (from the Corston Report). The documents had to be directly relevant to women separated from their child/ren under 18 months. They had to be publicly available and the intended audience to be those working in the sector or women prisoners.

Search terms

The main search terms were mother and/or baby/infant, attachment and separation (and related so attach* and separate*). Relevant documents were scanned for ‘child’ and ‘women’ with none of the above words and to ensure there were no alternative terms.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out following Braun and Clarke’s (2005) five stage framework. This was a ‘theoretical thematic analysis’ as specific references to mother and child separation were highlighted, and by extension any explicit or implicit references to ‘attachment’ were noted. Themes did not ‘emerge’ from the data but were driven by the research questions. Prevalence of themes was noted as an additional way

outlined the need for a woman-centred approach and made 43 recommendations for improving services for women.

of comparing between document categories. The key themes were developed from the focus on attachment and separation.

Procedure

Figure 1 – Flowchart showing search and analysis stages.

Findings

Stages 1 to 3: A systematic and comprehensive search was carried out to track down all relevant government documents from 1999 to August 2015 for Prison Service Orders (PSO) and Prison Service Instructions (PSI), and from 2007 to August 2015 for all other documents. 115 documents were initially identified as relevant and categorised into three groups for comparison⁹. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1 – Document categorisation.

The summative content analysis, focussing on key words, formed part of the initial answer to the first research aim. The key words were present across most documents: ‘mother’ or ‘baby’ was referred to in 50 documents, ‘separation’ in 45 and ‘attachment’ in 5. It is notable that attachment was referred to directly in policy and other government documents, but not in inspectorate reports. However, it is clear that the issue of separation is a pertinent one given the number of relevant inspectorate reports over the past eight years.

⁹ Initial search included Prison Service Orders (PSOs), Prison Service Instructions (PSIs), HM Inspectorate of Prison (HMIP) reports, Ministry of Justice (MoJ) reports, National Offender Management Service (NOMS) documents, House of Commons (HoC) reports, All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) reports.

55 documents had relevant data extracts for analysis. Relevant sections of documents were extracted and analysed. Individual data extracts were grouped together because of highly similar/identical turns of phrase. This ongoing grouping of themes made the thematic analysis more straightforward and also enabled a frequency count to see if thematic groups were very different from the emphases in the text.

Stage 4: This stage developed the response to the first research aim and explored the second aim of understanding the extent to which attachment theory is drawn on by comparing the differences between the document groups and also providing an overall picture. As the key word search highlighted, attachment is referred to far less often than separation. These findings will be discussed within each separate literature category for greater clarity.

1) Policy findings

Following the 1999 policy review of mothers and babies/children in prison, several key policies have been developed since 2008, which are crucial to understanding separations between mothers and babies in prison. PSO 4800 was created in response to the Corston Report to ensure that the gender specific needs of women were taken into account. It acknowledges the disproportionate levels of abuse women prisoners have suffered and the impact this has on them. Since 2008 there have been four specific MBU policies which also deal with separation. Although each new policy overwrites the previous one, all relevant ones were included to examine any changes over time.

The data extracts were grouped into four themes: ‘child focus’, ‘maintaining mother-child relationship’, ‘role of staff/support’ and ‘separation as trauma’. See Table 2 for totals.

Table 2 – Policy document themes.

What is most striking is the number of codes that focus on the child in comparison to either the mother-child relationship, or the role of staff. Furthermore, the ‘child focus’ theme draws on specific research in terms of ideas around age limits, ‘damage’ and ‘bonding’ which follows the emphasis of the policy on ‘best interests of the child’. However most of the academic research is not directly cited, rather it is mentioned as ‘expert advice’. There are only three specific references in the policy documents: a mis-cited Quaker Council report (Quaker Council for European Affairs, 2007), one piece of mis-spelled Spanish research from 2003 (Jiménez & Palacios, 2003) and a partially referenced work from 1984 that relates to six-year olds (Lewis, Feiring, McGuffog & Jaskir, 1984). The Quaker report is a comparative review of conditions in women’s prisons across Europe, the Spanish research assessed the educational context of infants in prison with their mothers, and the final work assessed the relationship between attachment status of children at one year with behaviour problems at age six. It is striking that more mainstream and directly relevant works were not cited.

The acknowledgement of the impact of separations on mothers, (including ‘psychological distress’ and ‘self-harm’) and on staff (‘stressful’ and ‘distressing’), does not lead to specific recommendations, nor does it draw on any research. There is also a distinct difference between the type of language used in reference to the children and to the mothers. For example in relation to children a typical extract is: ‘It is recognised that what a child needs in its early years is a constant caring and stimulating relationship with an adult’ (PSO 4801, p25).

This is clear and considerate language (although not particularly well defined), whereas a typical quote in reference to mother and staff needs does not demonstrate the same sensitivity: ‘Separations need to be planned well in advance’ (PSO 4800, p.52).

There are no details as to what needs to be planned or how these separations might be carried out in the document. The focus is very much on the welfare of the children and not the mothers’. And whilst there are some references to the needs of mothers and staff these are not clearly described or considered. These are interesting omissions given that PSO 4800 is specifically aimed at the treatment of women in prison, and the MBU policies are supposed to consider both mother and child.

2) HMIP reports

All relevant HMIP documents since 2007 were reviewed and these included thematic reports, HMIP Corston submissions, annual reports and inspections. Attachment was not referred to directly in any of these publications, however, the impact of separation on women was referred to repeatedly. It was also mentioned in 13 different sections of inspectorate reports, including ‘Safety’, ‘Respect’, ‘Self harm and suicide’, ‘Staff-prisoner relationships’ as well as more obvious ones referring to families and children. The wide scope of categories could signify how much separation has an impact on women across all domains of their time in prison. The codes were categorised in a similar way to the policy group, however, with some distinct differences. See Table 3 for details.

Table 3 – HMIP document themes.

In the inspectorate reports the mothers' perspective is by far the largest category in terms of codes. These all centred on the 'distress', 'suffering' and 'vulnerability' of the women due to separation. By contrast there was one mention of the impact on the child, which was described as 'catastrophic'. Given the nature of the prison reports there were two further themes on prison practice: positive and negative, which included the role of staff. Whilst the inspectorate documents do not mention attachment directly, they do repeatedly mention the impact of separation on the women with regards to distress and mental health in detailed ways. Here are two typical extracts: 'Disrupted relationships with children are a particular source of distress for women' (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006, p.58) and:

Even where prisons are aware that women are suffering the trauma of separation there is often little understanding about the emotional effect this will have on them and its repercussions which often just attract a disciplinary response. (Hardwick, 2010, p.14)

In contrast to the policy extracts, the focus is very much on distress and the impact on women as a result of separation from their children. There are lots of examples of positive prison practice (e.g. family support workers, third sector counselling, Samaritans Listeners,¹⁰ and chaplaincies) with regard to separation but, understandably as these are inspectorate reports, there is no sense of the theory or research underpinning these.

3) Other government documents

This small category of documents includes both non-policy government Mother and Baby Unit documents and relevant Corston documents. They were included because they had direct references to separation and attachment. See Table 4 for details.

¹⁰ Prisoners trained by The Samaritans (UK suicide-prevention charity) to support other prisoners through active listening.

Table 4 – Other government document themes.

It is noticeable that there are an equal number of codes mentioning the child's perspective and the impact on the mother, however all the 'impact on mother' references were in the Corston documents rather than the government documents. This group of documents does directly mention 'attachment theory' in a summary of the evidence and cites the following works: Bowlby, (1969); Ainsworth, (1982); Black, (1988); Fonagy, Target, Steele, & Steele, (1997); Rutter, (1981).

The extracts referring to the impact on mothers are also similar to those in the inspectorate group, using emotive language and emphasising the impact: 'Separation from their children was mental torture.' (Corston, 2007, p.33) and:

Motherhood is a factor that appears to protect women in the community against suicide but this protection does not apply in prison where mothers are separated from their children and those serving long sentences may lose their opportunity to have children. (Corston, 2007, p.22)

Whilst this was a small and heterogeneous group of documents, it was interesting that both mothers and children were referred to in equal terms and that attachment theory was referred to in an explicit way.

Themes across all documents

As the category findings demonstrate there are some shared themes with some interesting differences. Firstly all the categories have at least one direct mention of the 'trauma of separation' so it is acknowledged that being separated from a baby can have a very painful impact on a mother. However, there are variations in the emphasis placed on the impact on the mother or the child. Attachment theory is only referred to directly in relation to the child, and even in these cases it is relatively insubstantial, particularly

in the prison policy. Specific references to prison practice are mainly in inspection reports, and across all categories there is extremely limited mention of staff needs. Documents seem to lack a joint perspective of both mother and child.

Table 5 shows a summary of the global themes. What it reveals despite the different emphasis in each literature category is how there is a general overall cohesion between the different groups.

Table 5 – Global themes.

Discussion

Attachment theory is rarely directly mentioned throughout the documents examined, and generally only in relation to the impact on children. Separation, however, and its impact are repeatedly mentioned. The policy documents highlight the ‘best interests of the child’ whilst also pointing out that separation can be a ‘trigger for extreme distress and self-harm’ and that mothers need planning for and support. However the details for this support are lacking. The inspectorate reports repeatedly describe how separation causes distress, increasing anxiety and depression. They also give specific examples of positive and negative practice around separations in prisons. The remaining government documents also highlight that motherhood in prisons increases the risk of suicide and emotively cite separation as ‘mental torture’ which causes distress and directly affects mental health.

Thus there seems to be a general agreement that separation is traumatic – this was highlighted across the different literature categories. What differed were the nuances in the ways in which attachment theory and separation were referred to in the different categories. Furthermore, there are limited suggestions from a theoretical and

practical aspect as to how to support women, particularly in relation to the impact it has on their mental health. Attachment theory and therapy could fit in well with the current drive towards ‘trauma-informed’¹¹ approaches in prisons and also the gender-responsiveness highlighted as crucial in both the National Offender Management Service [NOMS] (2015) Analytical Report ‘Effective Interventions for Women Offenders: A Rapid Evidence Assessment’ and the Clinks (2015) response to HMIP thematic inspection of work with women offenders.

On the whole, however, prison policy has been focused on the ‘best interests of the child’, which is comprehensible given the intention of protecting children from the impact of imprisonment. However, attachment is predicated on a relationship with a carer and it is possible that overlooking the impact of separation on mothers is in fact contributing to cycles of difficulty for both mother and child.

Strengths and limitations

There was no involvement from a prisoner or prison worker, which would have added important reflections on the literature (e.g. Sweeney, Beresford, Faulkner, Nettle, & Rose, 2009). It could also be argued that as women are a minority group of prisoners, to focus a review on separation from children under two years is a narrow group which is relevant to only a small number of women. However, this is an age group which is critical in terms of perinatal health and risk of depression and is crucial in terms of women’s mental health, and the long term health of children, if and when they are reunited with their mothers.

¹¹ See the following for details of Stephanie Covington’s programme which is currently being rolled out in the female prison estate: <http://www.onesmallthing.org.uk/about/trauma-informed-practice-materials/>

Implications

Given that separation from a child is repeatedly referred to as so detrimental to women's mental health this seems to suggest that using attachment theory to inform practice would be of theoretical use. The examples highlighted in the inspectorate report underline what is already being done but it seems as if, particularly in relation to mental health, more could be done to support women through an exceptionally difficult situation. Developing and researching specific attachment-informed interventions might be one way forward as would further attachment-based research in this area.

A multi-pronged approach considering policy, the views of staff, women and attachment experts could help to understand what is happening and whether current research could improve policy to both support women in prison and on their release help them rebuild relationships with their children.

Conclusion

There was clear agreement across the documents that separation is traumatic for women in prison. However, the current emphasis on the 'best interests of the child', has obscured the impact on mothers and left an already vulnerable group of women more at risk of mental health needs which are not being responded to. Attachment theory is referred to implicitly; however, it could be used as a framework to understand the impact of separation on mothers and their mental health. Thus it could inform policy and practice to develop appropriate support for staff and mothers in prison.

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